



"Cookies" (client-side persistent information) and their use

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A "cookie" is a small piece of information which a web server (via a CGI script) can store with a web browser and later read back from that browser. This is useful for having the browser remember some specific information across several pages; for example, when you browse through a "virtual shopping mall" and add items to your "shopping cart" as you browse, a list of the items you've picked up is kept in your browser's cookie file so that you can pay for all the items at once when you're finished shopping.

A complete explanation of how cookies work is available on "http://home.netscape.com/newsref/std/cookie_spec.html". If you need more information about cookies than what's presented in this tech note, that's the best place to check next.

To create a cookie, a web server sends a "Set-Cookie" HTTP header line like this one in response to a URL access from a browser:

```
Set-Cookie: NAME=VALUE; expires=DATE; path=PATH; domain=DOMAIN_NAME; secure
```

NAME and VALUE are the actual information you're including in the cookie. DATE is the time at which the cookie information expires and will be "forgotten" by the browser. DOMAIN is a host or domain name for which the cookie is valid. PATH specifies a subset of the URLs at that server for which the cookie is valid. If you include "secure" in your cookie, then the cookie will only be transmitted over an SSL connection.

All of these fields except NAME=VALUE are optional.

Whenever the browser sends an HTTP request for a URL on a server which it has stored cookies for, it includes a line of the form:

```
Cookie: NAME=VALUE; NAME=VALUE; ...
```

which lists all cookies that apply.

Here is a sample CGI program (a Unix shell script) that sends a cookie:

```
#!/bin/sh
echo "Content-type: text/html"
echo "Set-cookie: MeLove=Cookie%20Monster; expires=Thursday, 01-Jan-98 12:00:00 GMT"
echo ""
echo "<H1>Me love Cookie Monster. Me love cookies.</H1>"
```

This stores "MeLove=Cookie Monster" with the browser. (Note that the

space in the value must be represented as a "%20" in the cookie.)

And here is a script that reads a cookie:

```
#!/bin/sh
echo "Content-type: text/html"
echo ""
echo "Here is your cookie (munch munch):<P>"
echo "$HTTP_COOKIE<P>"
```

By the way, if you came to this tech note hoping to find recipes for yummy cookies, then don't despair -- take a look at "<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~amyl/recipes/cookies/>".

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